UNITED STATES ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY
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February 2, 2012

Mr. Stuart J. Appelbaum
Jacksonville District
U.S. Army Corps of Engineers
P.O. Box 4970
Jacksonville, FL 32232-0019

Subject: EPA NEPA Comments on U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan (CERP) FEIS for the "Biscayne Bay Coastal Wetlands Phase 1"; December 2011; Miami-Dade County, FL; CEQ 20100078; ERP #COE-E39080-FL

Dear Mr. Appelbaum:

In accordance with our responsibilities under Section 102(2)(C) of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and Section 309 of the Clean Air Act, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has reviewed the referenced U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (COE) Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) for Phase I of the proposed Biscayne Bay coastal wetland restoration. We have discussed it with the COE (Jacksonville District), National Park Service (Biscayne National Park) and Miami-Dade County (Department of Environmental Resources Management: DERM). EPA believes that this proposed project is an important component of the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan (CERP).

The Biscayne Bay coastal wetlands consist of onshore freshwater wetlands (Biscayne Bay shorelands) and nearshore saltwater wetlands (Biscayne Bay). Over time, this project area has been degraded through canal drainage of freshwater runoff, which has changed the hydroperiod of affected onshore freshwater wetlands and reduced non-point flows into the Bay, which in turn created hypersaline conditions in nearshore Bay waters. The area has further been degraded through point source discharges of freshwater from the canal system into the Bay, which created hyposaline conditions at the point of discharge in nearshore Bay waters.

The Biscayne Bay Coastal Wetlands Project proposes to restore coastal freshwater wetlands by re-establishing overland flows cut off by the canal system and roadways, through redistribution of that water by a spreader system to rehydrate the 11,000-acre project area. The saltwater wetlands of nearshore Biscayne Bay would also be restored by limiting point source (canal) freshwater discharges into Biscayne Bay. Both actions would help restore Bay salinities to more natural/ambient levels that are more suitable for nursery and other nearshore habitats such as oyster reefs.

The proposed project is to be accomplished in two phases (two separate EISs and Project Implementation Reports: PIRs). The Tentatively Selected Plan identified in the FEIS to implement the present Phase 1 of the project is Alternative O. This alternative would help restore a 3,761-acre footprint through establishing seven pump stations, 10 culverts, three miles of spreader canals, and plugging 2,500 feet of mosquito control ditches.

Comments & Recommendations

EPA strongly supports this proposed project as a CERP water quality, wetland and habitat restoration project. We believe it constitutes a useful first step to accomplishing the project goals within current funding. We recommend the expedited implementation of Phase 1 – as well as prospective Phase 2 to further restore the coastal wetlands of Biscayne Bay.

EPA appreciates the opportunity to review the FEIS. Should you have questions regarding these comments, feel free to contact Jamie Higgins of my staff for NEPA issues (404-562-9681 or higgins.jamie@epa.gov) and Eric Hughes of the EPA Water Protection Division (located in the Jacksonville District office) for technical issues (904/232-2464 or Eric.H.Hughes@usace.army).

Sincerely,

Heinz J. Mueller, Chief
NEPA Program Office
Office of Policy and Management